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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 NOUAKCHOTT 000357

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MR](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#)

SUBJECT: THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION: AN EMPTY SHELL

REF: A. NOUAKCHOTT 330

[1](#)B. NOUAKCHOTT 344

[1](#)C. NOUAKCHOTT 284

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Mark M. Boulware, for reasons 1
.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: PolOff and PolAsst visited Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) representatives in the Trarza, Mauritania's second largest administrative and electoral region after Nouakchott. The visit took EmbOffs to two contrasting places: the regional capital of Rosso and the village of Tiguint. In Rosso, CENI Trarza Director Ahmed Jiddou Ould Aly discussed CENI's challenges, which included a blatant lack of resources and time. He had no qualms in highlighting irregularities, including the administration's failure to post electoral lists at least five days before the beginning of the campaign and the Wali's illegal fish distributions to poor populations on behalf of presidential candidate General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. In Tiguint, EmbOffs met with modest CENI representatives working without resources and forced to borrow a vehicle from the Wali for their transportation needs. A visit to designated polling stations showed no signs of electoral lists barely 48 hours before the beginning of the campaign. In both Rosso and Tiguint, CENI representatives expressed their regret that a political consensus had not been reached before the election, but declared themselves committed to ensuring the election is "fair and transparent" -- at least in theory. End summary.

CENI TRARZA DIRECTOR HIGHLIGHTS IRREGULARITIES

[1](#)2. (C) PolOff and PolAsst traveled to Rosso (127 miles south of Nouakchott) on May 19 to meet with CENI Trarza Director Ahmed Jiddou Ould Aly. Comment: The trip, originally scheduled for the previous week, had to be postponed following the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) unfavorable response to the Embassy's diplomatic note (Ref A). CENI Director and long-time Embassy contact Cheikh Saad Bouh Camara, displeased to learn the MFA had discouraged EmbOffs from meeting with CENI representatives, insisted the meetings be held and graciously facilitated them. End comment.

13. (C) Jiddou received EmbOffs in the extremely spartan CENI Trarza headquarters which contained a table, a computer, and three chairs he had borrowed from the Hakem for the purposes of the meeting. An Agence Mauritanienne d'Information (AMI) journalist, Jiddou explained he had been "indefinitely suspended" from AMI for "opinions" he voiced in articles. He is currently the editor of his own newspaper, Al Mourabit. Jiddou was a 2007 CENI member and served as CENI Director of the Guidimaka region. Note: Guidimaka is the southern-most region of Mauritania, bordering with Mali and Senegal. End note.

14. (C) Jiddou started the meeting by explaining that the electoral lists, which were released two days prior, had not yet been published in accordance with Mauritanian electoral law. Note: The law mandates that the list be published in every polling station and town hall at least five days prior to the beginning of the electoral campaign. End note. Jiddou stated this requirement would not be met as the lists had arrived too late. Comment: CENI announced the publication of the lists online on May 17. Nevertheless, the link was not working and is still not working (Ref B). EmbOffs saw electoral lists posted in the Rosso town hall and, ironically, a USG funded fire station that has been designated as a polling station. End comment. Jiddou continued by stating that, on the positive side, the presidents of polling stations had been designated, the material had arrived and the voting ballots had been ordered in London (but not yet arrived).

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15. (C) When asked how many voters had registered in the Trarza, Jiddou called the Wali to obtain the numbers. He stated there were 136,000 voters and an additional 146,909 from the recent electoral census. He further stated there are 350,000 inhabitants in the Trarza, which is the biggest electoral region after Nouakchott with 383 voting polls, six prefectures and five arrondissements. Comment: The number of registered voters could not be checked against the "published" electoral lists because the links do not work. Nevertheless, the numbers stated by Jiddou seem unlikely, given the overwhelmingly young population in the region. End comment.

16. (C) Jiddou proceeded to highlight other irregularities. He said that according to the law, presidential candidates have to submit their campaign schedules to the Wali five days before the beginning of the campaign. He said no schedules had been given to the Wali yet. "If we apply the law, there will be no campaign," he stated. Nevertheless, he explained that failure to comply with this regulation is not new: "Laws exist, but Mauritians find a way to circumvent them," he said. Historically, Mauritanian candidates have rarely turned in their schedules on time, or sometimes not at all. Jiddou wrote to CENI Director Camara to flag the situation and recommend that CENI take action, either by enforcing or modifying the law. Jiddou also said that barely 48 hours before the official launch of the campaign, candidates had not designated their representatives in the Trarza.

HOW IT WORKS AND THE LIMITS OF TRANSPARENCY

17. (C) Jiddou explained that the voting poll directors had already been designated. He explained the Wali suggests to CENI a list of candidates deemed trustworthy and impartial. The CENI vets the list and the final version is sent to the Ministry of the Interior. The CENI can replace any directors at any time, even during the campaign, if it does not deem them neutral. Comment: The Wali plays a very prominent role in the election organization process. The transparency of the election is thrown into doubt, given that General Aziz replaced all of the Walis with his supporters. The Wali can, with CENI complicity or purposeful oversight, select voting

poll directors that are favorable to Aziz. Jiddou later stated he had seen the Wali of Rosso distributing fish on behalf of General Aziz. This comment shows the lack of impartiality of some involved in election planning. End comment.

18. (C) The day of the election, votes are counted immediately after polls close in front of CENI representatives, candidate representatives and international observers. The certificate with the final results is then sent to the Ministry of the Interior, the Wilaya (province), the CENI, the Constitutional Council, the Moughata (district) and the Arrondissement. The Ministry of the Interior publishes the temporary results until certification by the Constitutional Council. Jiddou confirmed the Arab League, the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), Libya and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs would send observers. Comment: The Constitutional Council has played a dubious role in the crisis, effectively rubber-stamping Aziz's contention that there was a presidential vacancy (Ref C). General Aziz also appointed the Minister of the Interior, who according to local press is campaigning on his behalf. The opposition (FNDD and RFD) will have no representatives at the polling stations, while the neutrality of some of the international observers can also be questioned. End comment.

OBSTACLES

19. (C) Jiddou stated that one of the main problems he confronted was the lack of resources. The international

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community had contributed generously to the 2007 elections whereas these elections are planned exclusively with Mauritanian government resources. He also stated the lack of time to conduct proper bids was a hurdle. For example, CENI offices do not have photocopy machines because the procurement process would take too long. Nevertheless, he was happy that this time they have more vehicles, and that 90% of the cars they were provided were brand new. Note: Vehicles are an important tool that allows CENI officials to observe the campaign at remote sites and ensure compliance with the law. Interestingly enough, whereas Jiddou has access to numerous vehicles, his CENI colleagues in the village of Tiguint have none, and had to rely on Embassy vehicles to show EmbOffs polling stations. End note.

110. (C) Jiddou did not hide that it would have been preferable to have more time to plan. First, he stated, time would have helped reach a much needed political consensus. Second, extra time was necessary just from an organizational viewpoint. Also, Jiddou said that the rush in planning the elections prevented CENI representatives from properly overseeing all stages of preparation. For example, Jiddou did not have a chance to monitor the electoral census as he was only appointed after it took place. He was also not available to choose the voting polls. He stated the presidential campaign was opening in 48 hours, but CENI was not yet fully operational. Jiddou highlighted that an early arrival of the rainy season, known in Mauritania as the "hivernage", could affect election participation in Guidimaka and other regions. Note: During the rainy season, roads become flooded and certain Mauritanian regions remain isolated for months. End note. Jiddou complained the election was organized "in a rush."

111. (C) According to Jiddou, the administration has the intention of organizing fair and transparent elections and has cooperated with CENI to that end. CENI Director Professor Camara had requested that CENI representatives show particular zeal in ensuring transparency. Jiddou reassured EmbOffs that the election results would be transparent even if what was going on in the background was not. According to Jiddou, the real issue in this election, however, would be

the participation rate. He said historically 30% of those registered to vote abstained from voting. Jiddou thought that if we add to those the number of people who will abstain for political reasons, the abstention rate may reach at least 63%. According to Jiddou, in the first round of the last election RFD's Ahmed Ould Daddah obtained 20% of the vote, APP's Messaoud Ould Boulkheir 9% and UFP's Mohamed Ould Maouloud 4%. He also factored in a small percentage for voters who were favorable to President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. He said if all these people abstain from voting, the abstention rate would increase by 33% over the traditional 30% for his estimated total of 63%. Such a rate of abstention would cast serious doubts on the election's legitimacy, he asserted.

COUNTRY VOTER AND CITY VOTER

¶12. (C) Jiddou highlighted differences between city voters and country-side voters. He explained that cities like Nouakchott and Rosso are political hotbeds, where all political tendencies and tribes are represented and no tribes prevail. He told EmbOffs to expect a high abstention rate in Nouakchott. Even under Ould Taya's reign, Nouakchott showed great electoral independence. Mauritaniens in the interior, on the other hand, live in cohesive villages and vote along tribal lines. He stated in a village everybody will vote for the same candidate. Abstention is unlikely as villages are dependent on the central authorities for resources, and no tribe wants to be perceived as opposing the state. He said it was very likely that Mauritaniens in the interior would vote for Aziz. Aziz and the administration have "means to pressure" tribes in the interior. Taking in consideration

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Mauritanian opportunism, he would not be surprised if the boycott did not work to the extent the opposition expects. He reminded EmbOffs that in his last Council of Ministers, Aziz nominated at least 70 people to government positions and that the election would be time for these people to deliver for Aziz. He also stated that the previous day, he had seen the Rosso Hakem and Wali distributing free fish to the population. "They could distribute fish to the poor 365 days a year but they choose to do it now that the campaign is starting. That says a lot about their intentions," he intimated. Jiddou also advised EmbOffs to observe elections in the Trarza, home to opposition leader Ahmed Ould Daddah. He said if people in the Trarza voted, that would mean opportunism had achieved the upper hand over principles. Note: EmbOffs are planning to travel to Boutilimit, Daddah's hometown, on election day. End note.

MOTIVATIONS

¶13. (C) When asked why he decided to accept a position with such a contested CENI, Jiddou responded that he considered his work to be of a technical and not a political nature. "I don't care about politics," he declared. He said bureaucrats work for any administration, independently of whether they agree with it or not. He stated that he wanted to volunteer his knowledge and intended to resign if he ever felt pressured to act against his conscience. For him, even if the opposition is boycotting the election, it is in their best interest that the election be as free and fair as possible so that they can have a real indication of the participation rate.

TAYA PART TWO

¶14. (C) According to Jiddou, Mauritania is divided in two and neither of the two factions can truly say they are the

majority. He stated that all actors in the crisis were responsible. The negotiations are not fruitful because none of the actors wants to give the other an "honorable exit." Jiddou believes that Aziz's chances of winning would diminish considerably if the opposition decided to participate in the election. When asked whether he thought Aziz would accept a delay in the elections if the opposition agreed to participate, he smiled maliciously and said "of course not! He would never accept that." He stated it was not in Aziz's interest to wait. For example, he said an extension could open up the door to other candidates that could really threaten Aziz's chances of getting elected.

¶15. (C) Jiddou thinks Aziz will dissolve the National Assembly upon his election to eliminate the nearly 40 deputies that oppose him. As in President Maaouiya Ould Taya's time, the National Assembly will become monolithic. Mauritania will become a dictatorship with a democratic veneer and the opposition will operate from the shadows. Another unlikely possibility would be for Aziz to find a compromise, arrange fair and transparent legislative elections and allow the opposition to integrate the government, forming a government of national unity. But Jiddou said he did not think this was possible as "Aziz had attended the Taya school and graduated with honors." The only difference between Aziz and Taya, he said, is that Aziz is much better in the "populism" department.

NOTHING MUCH IN TIGUINT

¶16. (C) EmbOffs met with Tiguint CENI representatives Nemine Ould Taleb and Abdallahi Barry, who seemed thrilled to receive them. Tiguint, a village with 10,000 inhabitants between Nouakchott and Rosso, lives off agriculture, cattle

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herding and limited roadside commerce. The Tiguint CENI headquarters were even more spartan than those in Rosso. They had no furniture, telephones or computers. Nevertheless, there were plenty of CENI posters and electoral educational materials. CENI representatives stated they were borrowing the Wali's car as they had not been provided a vehicle. Comment: That those mandated with ensuring the fairness of the elections are reduced to borrowing vehicles from those they are supposed to supervise is troubling. End comment. Ould Taleb and Barry expressed their desire for a consensual solution and highlighted the crisis was painful for Mauritania. Nevertheless, they stressed in Mauritania people always side with those in power and said they are confident that the country will find calm and resolution after the election.

¶17. (C) They stated the electoral lists had not been posted yet and were unable to provide EmbOffs with the number of registered voters. They asked EmbOffs to drive them to two schools that have been designated as voting polls and that they had not been able to visit yet (probably because they do not have a vehicle). Electoral lists were nowhere to be seen.

¶18. (C) Comment: This trip confirmed that elections are badly planned and rushed. Post also wonders how an electoral commission can work under the gun and without resources, particularly transportation and communication. Two days before the start of the campaign, the Trarza CENI was barely up and running. Post casts serious doubts on CENI's independence and capacity to ensure free and fair elections. Electoral commission representatives seem to be just going through the motions and putting up a show for the sake of getting Aziz elected. Even if elections are procedurally free and transparent, Aziz has stacked the deck so much in his favor through behind the scenes manipulations that there is little doubt as to the outcome. End comment.
BOULWARE